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United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq

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IRAQ

Under a United Nations supervised Oil for Food Programme, Iraq is allowed to sell limited quantities of oil to pay for medicines and basic supplies. But the low world oil prices, together with the poor state of the Iraqi oil industry has made it impossible for the country to raise the money that has been authorized by the Security Council for humanitarian purpose. In this edition of **World Chronicle**, Hans von Sponeck, UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq, discusses the hardships faced by the population of Iraq.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**. The United Nations "Oil for Food" programme in Iraq began in December 1996. Under this special programme, Iraq is allowed to sell oil to buy mostly food, medicine and other humanitarian goods for its people, who have been suffering under economic sanctions imposed since Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990. But falling prices for crude combined with Iraq's degraded pumping facilities has made it impossible for the country to raise the billions of dollars authorized by the Security Council for humanitarian purposes.

Our guest today has firsthand knowledge of the situation in Iraq. He is Hans von Sponeck, United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq. Joining me to talk with Mr. Von Sponeck is John Metzler of *USA Radio Network* and Mohamed Attia Saad of the *Voice of America*.

Mr. Von Sponeck, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

VON SPONECK: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. von Sponeck, on top of all the other problems – the low price of oil and the degraded pumping facilities we referred to in the introduction – there's the new problem of air attacks by the United States and the British Forces in the so-called "no fly" or "no flight" zone in Iraq, and the pipeline that links Iraq and Turkey was damaged by one of these attacks and there have been – at least the communication facilities were damaged and other damages have been caused. What effect is this going to have on the "Oil for Food" Programme?

VON SPONECK: I would say it certainly enhances the volatility of the circumstances under which some 420 international United Nations staff and over a thousand Iraqi UN staff have to work. Every day the roads of Iraq – all of the roads in Iraq – are plied by trucks and vehicles that bring humanitarian supplies to different parts of the country and with this intensification of air strikes and aerial confrontation between the Iraqi Air Force and allied aircraft, you can imagine that this has an impact on the freedom of

movement of United Nations staff. And I would say it also has an impact on the psychology of the situation.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is there a risk that you might have to suspend the programme if this goes on?

VON SPONECK: At this stage I would say we are hampered but basically we can continue to carry out our work. We have taken a number of steps to protect the security of our staff and our property. For example, on the road between Mosul and Dohuk, the Northwestern Kurdish governorate in Iraq, we halt movement of personnel and goods during that period when usually these confrontations take place. So that already limits a little bit the freedom of movement that we have. I hope it does not go beyond that.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you get any advanced warning from the US and the UK when these things are going to happen?

VON SPONECK: We have no contact and we shouldn't. We are in Iraq and we have no idea when these strikes occur, but we have a little bit of experience to know that it usually happens late morning, early afternoon.

SAAD: Mr. Von Sponeck, given these facts that you talk about now, what are the priorities of the programme in Iraq?

VON SPONECK: As everyone agrees, I would say there is a rare consensus between the government of Iraq and the Sanctions Committee. The priorities must be first and foremost the supply of food and the supply of medicines. Those are the initial priorities and they will remain so.

SAAD: What if these priorities are affected by the air attacks?

VON SPONECK: Then we have a very serious problem. We have a little bit of a buffer as we had in November when the first crisis occurred and again in mid-December. But the stock levels are such that one cannot halt very long the inflow of goods and the distribution of goods to a very decentralized circumstance.

METZLER: Mr. von Sponeck, isn't one of the problems transportation itself beyond the air attacks? Namely, that the supplies get to Iraqi ports but then cannot physically leave those ports and get into the countryside or to the other cities.

VON SPONECK: It's not so much an overstocking at the points of entry. There are three land entry and one sea entry points. The goods usually move quite swiftly out of the ports and out of the border areas. The problem, in particular with regard to medicines, is that they often stay much too long in warehouses and not moved as quickly.

LITTLEJOHNS: But why is that? Why do they stay so long?

VON SPONECK: There is absolutely no easy explanation to this. I would quite honestly tell you that it's not because of a deliberate act of withholding medicines on the part of the Iraqi government that would explain the situation. There are other factors. Maybe there is that. I have difficulty in judging this.

LITTLEJOHNS: But why would they deliberately keep the stuff in storage?

VON SPONECK: Actually that's the question I have. Maybe their energies are tied up in other areas but I do not have evidence that this is the prime cause of the problem. To us, a prime problem is indeed the lack of transport. It's also a lack of motivation. Gentlemen, if you earn $1.50 a month what kind of motivation do you have to aggressively do hard work? And then there is the absence of cash which, by the regulations of the Security Council, is not allowed to be in the hands of Iraqi and all that translates into many opportunities to explain why these important items don't swiftly move into end-user points.

METZLER: So it's inefficiency perhaps though too perhaps as even during the Ethiopian crisis we saw when the government actually deliberately did withhold food and medicine from certain parts of the country. Hasn't this come up really in Iraq as well? I've heard the allegation and I'm using the word 'allegation'.

VON SPONECK: Let me first of all make a distinction also between food and medicines because the food items move, I would say, fairly satisfactorily and everybody agrees to this. They move both within the part of Iraq that is under the direct supervision of the Baghdad government, and also between the Baghdad side, and that part which is under the influence of the Northern Kurdish governorates that works quite well. With the medicines it is slightly different. Inefficiency certainly plays a role in that but I would say there is a multiplicity of factors and I don't think – I do not accept a monocausal

explanation for why these items don't go as quickly as they should.

SAAD: But in spite of these factors, these different factors especially the logistical factor, you still blame the Iraqis for these delays. Did you present them with suggestions to enhance the distribution plan or the ....

VON SPONECK: You know, I mean, my role is indeed that of a troubleshooter. I must be very cognizant of the state of movement of humanitarian groups and if there are problems we raise them. Sometimes we resolve them – not always. But certainly we are in daily contact with the Iraqi authorities and I find a good effort to cooperate with the United Nations. So from our end, from the Baghdad side, it looks slightly more favourable than what one often hears and reads about in the Western press.

SAAD: Is it different in the north than in the south?

VON SPONECK: That is a very good question. I think it is. You probably know that in the centre and south the United Nations has been charged with observation responsibility. That is about a half of the 420–430 international staff that operate in Iraq is deployed in the centre and south to ensure that they can confirm to the United Nations, to the Secretary-General, that goods are moving as they should, identify bottlenecks, try to remove them. That's our role in the centre and south. In the north, the formula is that the United Nations, on behalf of the Government of Iraq, implements – actually implements – the humanitarian programme. That's quite a different responsibility and is, of course, involving the specialized agencies who are directly responsible to the Office of the Iraq Programme for the implementation of this programme.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. von Sponeck, as we talk around this table, Benon Sevan, the Executive Director of the Programme – of the Office of the Iraq Programme as it is called – says that there's currently a 900 million dollar gap between the revenue expected and what's needed to fund the humanitarian programme because of the depressed price of oil and the state of Iraq's oil industry. This is for the six-month period authorized by the Security Council. Is there any chance at all that this 900 million dollar shortfall can be eliminated and the Iraqis can get the stuff they need?

VON SPONECK: At this moment, when we speak, I'm fearful that the amount of

this shortfall may indeed increase because of the fact that there was damage done by allied air forces on the installations. I hope that this will not be the case. If we have only an estimated 1.6 billion dollars on the basis of the current pumping rate and the current world market prices for oil, we will have just a little more than we had in phase 1, 2 and 3 that started, as you said, in late 1996. That would worry us a lot. Because one thing is clear – that an amount of 1.6 billion cannot possibly, over a six-month period, be enough to meet even what is perceived by the United Nations and the Security Council as a supplementary income.

LITTLEJOHNS: So when certain Security Council members talk very grandly about raising the amount of oil – increasing the amount of oil – that Iraq can export beyond the 5.2 billion every six months it's really meaningless if they can only export at the present time less than 3 billion.

VON SPONECK: Well it only will have meaning when the Iraqi oil industry is put back into position where it can pump oil of a volume that it once did.

LITTLEJOHNS: And how long will that take?

VON SPONECK: Let me just say before answering this – before 1990 the annual output in dollar terms was just about 15 billion. The annual output now in dollar terms is in the neighbourhood of six billion. So a vast downward trend. And I believe nothing will change until the oil industry is put into a better shape. This is in the making, but as the Director of the Office of the Iraq Programme, Mr. Benon Sevan, has stressed the chances that this will have..... The impact of the import of oil spare parts will not be before the next century.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Hans von Sponeck, United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq.

SAAD: Mr. von Sponeck, if you are here we know that you are here to report to the Security Council panel on the humanitarian situation in Iraq, how do you characterize the impact of sanctions on Iraq and do you support lifting these sanctions?

VON SPONECK: You know, my mandate is very clear. My mandate is to assist the Secretary-General to implement the memorandum of understanding which the United

Nations signed last year, or the year before excuse me, with the government of Iraq. My role in that context is very clear. If I start questioning the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the sanction, I will interfere with the conduct of my job. I am not going to do that. So, I will disappoint you in the answer that I'm giving. I want to argue that I'm supposed to be a good manager, a good troubleshooter and – and I emphasize this and may be this is a part response to your question – to be an honest interpreter of a very difficult humanitarian situation affecting 23 million people. That I try to do. If this – if this – is a contribution to a rethink of the way Iraq is handled at the moment, so much the better.

SAAD: So what's the impact of the sanctions on the social fabric of the Iraqi society?

VON SPONECK: The issue of the social fabric is of great concern to us. I would say that the resources that are put at the disposal of Iraq at the moment will at best slow down a deteriorating trend in terms of the quality of life and in terms of the social fabric. We have not hard core empirical evidence to show what I'm trying to say now but we have anecdotal evidence in large measure that show that it has affected family cohesion it has affected the professionalization, I'd rather call it de-professionalization because people, highly trained people... Iraqis were among the group in the Arab world that was highly trained – above average compared to other countries. Today, we have pilots, engineers, doctors, even in the immediate environment of the United Nations working as card keepers, as night clerks, as secretaires simply to earn a living. So we have ...

LITTLEJOHNS: A $1.50 a month you say these people are making?

VON SPONECK: Well, a $1.50 a month is what I'm told a factory worker – woman working in a textile factory is earning.

LITTLEJOHNS: But how can they possibly live on that?

VON SPONECK: Well, this is why members of the household who should be studying law or humanities or whatever do not study but go out and do occasional jobs in order to supplement this meagre income to make ends meet.

METZLER: Returning to the actual state of the petroleum industry. The flow of spare parts is indeed important for the flow of petroleum. It seems to me that in looking at

the various contracts that have been awarded, recently 367 contracts, there has been a conspicuous absence of Canadian and American firms. There have been Chinese, Russian, alas even French firms, that have gotten these contracts – oil spare parts . Why haven't American and Canada firms been getting the contracts?

VON SPONECK: Is this a provocative question?

METZLER: No.

VON SPONECK: Because I think Iraq will, in trying to procure, turn to those who are close to them and close to Iraq at the moment are those countries that have representations in Baghdad. The French, the Russians, the Chinese, several Arab countries, they are there. There's a direct and daily exchange. So they know these countries well and why should they then go to their protagonists I ask you?

METZLER: But the British are getting contracts, too.

VON SPONECK: I'm sorry – Canada is not a protagonist, I must exclude that. But Canada is ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Canada took a pro position with regard to the air strikes in December.

VON SPONECK: That may have an influence. I don't know. I don't want to speculate here. But if you look, and this is not a secret, you can look in their file who is getting contracts. These are the very countries that have a very constructive relationship with Iraq and therefore are more successful in competing for limited opportunities to supply parts.

METZLER: But yet the British are often in the – well the RAF is in the skies over Iraq very often and yet those British companies are getting contracts as well.

VON SPONECK: I'm afraid the picture is very clear. Neither British nor US companies have in the recent phases are been successful beyond a very, very small amount of inputs, particularly in those areas where equipment is of origin from these countries and therefore the spare parts must come also from those countries. But that is the exception rather than the norm.

SAAD: Given the accusations against UNSCOM, how do people ...

LITTLEJOHNS: UN Special Commission.

SAAD: Yes, the UN Special Commission .... how do the Iraqi people deal with your people on the ground?

VON SPONECK: I don't think I would be correct – I am not hedging questions – to talk about UNSCOM but I can talk about Iraqi reaction to the UN presence and I'd like to make two observations here. One is, it amazes me that there is such a balanced and correct interaction with us. We are very careful in watching the security circumstances in Iraq and I can tell you since the mid-December strikes, we have had one incident where young boys tried to throw stones at these visible, slightly provocative UN white vehicles. Stones. And their elders came and restrained them. That is, I would say, quite symptomatic for the way the Iraqi public is looking to us. That we are not there as the celebrated friends is also correct to say. But we have no problem in terms of going about in our daily affairs in Baghdad or in other parts of Central and Southern Iraq. When it comes to the North, in the Kurdish provinces, the situation is different. The Kurdish provinces of Iraq look to the United Nations as a guardian, as, if you want, a reassurance and therefore we are visibly welcomed in that part of the country.

SAAD: In you work over there, do you have any official contacts with the Iraqi officials. Ministers?

VON SPONECK: I have daily contact with the government of Iraq. My main counterparts sit in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I have access to ministers. I have called on the Vice President of the country. When there is a troubleshooting role for me to play, I see ministers. Before coming to New York, I saw the Minister of Education because the education component is not doing very well. We are received as we ask for appointments and the relationship with the Iraqi officials is correct.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. von Sponeck, understandably you don't want to take a position on whether sanctions should or should not be lifted because of your delicate position but sanctions, of course, inevitably are a blunt instrument. Is there any way that sanctions could be manipulated so they will be less damaging to the innocent civilians? I'm thinking particularly of women and children and the elderly. Is there anything that you

and your programme are doing to relieve them a bit from the bad effects of sanctions?

VON SPONECK: Well, I have brought this to the attention of those who are dealing here in New York with the Iraq programme. In the UN and outside the UN, and I very strongly feel that one should rethink some of the stringent measures that are imposed at the moment. For example with regards to the import of educational material. I find it very sad that a country that is now or should prepare its youth for responsible leadership tomorrow is unable to imbue into this youth knowledge which is available elsewhere, knowledge which is meant to prepare them for participation also in our globalized village, it's not coming. I went to universities and to medical faculties. What you see there in terms of knowledge material is simply shocking. There's nothing.

LITTLEJOHNS: That's simply they don't have the money to spend on it?

VON SPONECK: They don't have the money and there is an embargo.

LITTLEJOHNS: There's an embargo on educational material?

VON SPONECK: Embargo. It's not allowed. I was told, for example, if you are trying to send from the US material to Iraq, it must not exceed four ounces. So there is nothing that can be sent. Material simply is not reaching and I would hope that we can rethink that in the interest of responsible treatment of the young people that may want to be tomorrow part of the committee of nations.

SAAD: Can the programme refer that to the Sanctions Committee or you've done that already?

VON SPONECK: I have done that. I have appealed individually and collectively to the Security Council and to individual members to rethink this aspect together with a whole series of others I don't want to go into here. But to me, education, the whole social factor concerns are, if we have any vision for tomorrow, maybe the key aspect of this renegotiation of the treatment that is presently carried out with regard to Iraq.

METZLER: Ironically, though isn't the problem part really then of the price of oil? That oil is really at an abnormally low price and even if they could double or re-double their efforts yet again they're simply not bringing in the cash flow they had a few years ago? So it's a catch-22 of sorts.

VON SPONECK: No doubt and the hardliners will say spend less on military and make more available for humanitarian supplies, for example education. Totally logical. I don't know how this can be done and whether or not one simply expects too much from a country that is under so much under stress at the moment but the demand from our side for paying more attention to the social sectors is unrelenting.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. von Sponeck, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been Hans von Sponeck, United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq. He was interviewed by John Metzler of *USA Radio Network* and Mohamed Attia Saad of *The voice of America*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**